

EXHIBIT B



The softer side of S/M

In his new collection of stories, Stephen Elliott examines his experiences with torture and love through admirably clear eyes.



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At the age of 20, Stephen Elliott writes, nearly penniless and staying at a scuzzy Amsterdam youth hostel, he meets a woman with "a bored expression on her face" who was "old compared to me, and not pretty. She had thick shoulders, a football player's body, and short spiky hair that had gone grey in patches ... Her skin was the color of clay." Oh, and she's very pockmarked. Yet Elliott's interested in her because he's seen her torturing a "soft and shapeless" man at a local S/M bar.

He encounters the woman hanging out by the hostel's lockers, where two men are trying to force their way upstairs so they can beat up a guest who owes them money. Outside are lots of muggers and pickpockets, "gays in chaps and shirtless women cruising" and "junkies [who] sat on bags of garbage sticking their arms." Elliott tells the clay-colored woman where he saw her before (she asks, "What were

you doing in *that* bar?") and, although he's terrified he will have to walk back to the hostel alone -- because "there was no safe way back to the hostel at night" -- he goes with her for a drink, then to her hotel room.

Without asking his consent, preferences or anything else ("take your clothes off and put them in the corner" is all she says) she cuts his legs with a knife (threatening his balls), burns him with a cigarette, and temporarily asphyxiates him. It's his first S/M scene after a childhood and adolescence full of experiences of rape and assault in youth homes, after being thrown out of the house by his abusive father at the age of 13. His reaction? "I was very comfortable," Elliott writes. "I don't think I had ever been comfortable before."

That passage is one of the reasons to love this book. "My Girlfriend Comes to the City and Beats Me Up" is a collection of linked stories that Elliott says amount to something "damn close" to a memoir. But Elliott, a Salon contributor and author of the critically acclaimed novel "**Happy Baby**," also says he "knowingly made up" some details and created a few composite characters, so "My Girlfriend " should more narrowly be considered fiction. Still, the author wishes to acknowledge "the general if not complete truth of this book" and, in particular, the fact that "every sexual act" depicted happened.

To Elliott, it's important to affirm his book's veracity because he wants all S/M people to feel freer and less ashamed. But I'm glad that he puts it out as true for a slightly different reason: because it shows the genuine, unmitigable weirdness of all human beings, sexually and otherwise. Elliott's emotional truthfulness is what is bravest here, not his sexual candor. His willingness to reveal himself in all his vulnerable glory is moving and strangely redemptive in the sense that it makes all our strange feelings and self-destructive acts comprehensible and worthy of compassion.

Leather folk or not, we all have some perilous or disturbing desires, and we all have, at least once, acted on them. In this context, S/M is a good cypher for all counter-rational deeds: We've all been, at least metaphorically, in that scuzzy hostel in Amsterdam.

When Elliott wakes up with the clay-colored woman, for example, it is probably the first time he has ever felt emotionally close to another human being because of sex. Like so many of us, he feels the need to flee immediately after feeling so intimate, actually going straight to the train station and out of the country. "I didn't understand what I was feeling. I thought it was an urge to be buried alive or drowned but it was probably a desire to crawl back into bed and stay." In Berlin he rents a tiny room and lies in bed for two weeks, "listening to German radio and sleeping and masturbating until my penis was lined with friction sores and broken skin." Then he heads back to Amsterdam, can't find her -- he doesn't even know her name -- and feels only loss.

What makes Stephen Elliott's writing most distinctive is that he's not afraid of sadness, even sadness that is inspired by crazy feelings or sadness that is not ever redeemed. In my time, I've certainly confused attraction and love with being drowned or buried alive -- haven't you, at least once? And I have also felt safer, on occasion, with ugly or dangerous people, as Elliott does. But few writers of memoir take up the challenge and go to frightening places like this, because America hates sadness and sad facts, and hates imperfection -- the quality of not being "OK" -- most of all.

Strangely, S/M writers are sometimes the most squeamish of all when it comes to revealing imperfection, moral haziness or even ambiguity in themselves and their erotic relationships. Under attack from the right, S/M authors are so often worried about letting down their side that they present sadomasochists in a sanitized, even whitewashed way that refuses to acknowledge the existence of tops who sometimes violate their bottoms' consent, or occasions when consent is equivocal. Or, even more heretical, encounters that leave some participants sad or unfulfilled.

But Elliott, an S/M activist and a fierce activist for progressive causes generally, is unwilling to bowdlerize his own life. In the title piece, "My Girlfriend Comes to the City and Beats Me Up," a woman Elliott meets online purposefully gets enraged at him at the beginning of each date so that she can hurt him as much as she wants to. Many tops do this, of course, but this suburban woman does it so cloyingly and obviously that beyond being ethically questionable, it's just not sexy. "Why don't you just tell me my scene? Why don't you do that?" she yells when he asks what she would like him to do. "It's too late for

sorry." Then she hits him so hard in the ears that he's afraid it will damage his hearing. He tries to rev himself up for her. "It's not like outside of the bedroom we had interesting conversations ... Maybe if I was tied up or something I could get in the mood. But what do you do when you're not in the mood and someone is hitting you and you want them to stop?"

Yet after this truly annoying woman says something disturbing about Elliott's dead mother (something he hasn't asked for) and he cries, he finds himself asking her to hurt him. "Why do I want her to hurt me now? Now that I feel so vulnerable and sad." When she pinches his nipples so hard that he screams, he says, "Please don't stop," "my voice getting higher and softer the more she squeezes, the more it hurts, until I'm certain she'll break the skin. Why do I like it now and not before?"

This girlfriend writes a letter telling him she wants to "beat me way past the point of crying, to the point of yelling Oh Please God No, and the neighbors wouldn't come." Is this erotic? Is it terrible and sad? In this story, her fantasy comes across as both, which is some of Elliott's genius. Unlike the strictest S/M ideologues on the one hand or right-wing moralists on the other, he's not content to let it be one or the other. He shows his truth, which is that it is both.

In another story, "Other Desires, " Elliott works at a hellish San Francisco bagel shop whose customers are nearly all junkies in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. His co-worker, Valerie, gets high a lot and has pink pigtails and an abusive, jerky boyfriend whom she loves. (Fancying himself a knife-thrower, the boyfriend amuses himself by throwing knives at Valerie's head. He also shakes down a young girl who is an addict and prostitute, threatening her in the bagel store as Elliott watches.) If this were a typical avant-garde book about slumming, Valerie and her boyfriend and Elliott would all be colorful, at least mostly fun, and superior to all the boring people who don't throw knives at people's heads, or live and work in poor neighborhoods full of junkies and prostitutes. But Elliott and Valerie and the young girl are not presented as having that much fun.

This story features another irritating dom, named Bell, who insists that Elliott pretend to be jealous of her (possibly nonexistent) husband. "My husband knows," she says. She walks deliberately, one boot in front of the other. "Yeah, I told him." (When Elliott can't muster up enough outrage about this, she pulls his hair.) On another occasion, she calls and says, charmingly, "Get me off ... Imagine me hitting you. Imagine the phone between my legs. I'm sitting on your face. I'm smothering you. You can't breathe." Did I mention that she's physically unattractive?

But, of course, Elliott also likes what Bell says and does to him, which is why he stays despite frequently wanting, and sometimes trying, to break up with her. When she fucks him with a strap-on, he fantasizes

about the very first time he was raped, by a middle-aged caseworker in a Chicago juvenile detention home. "When I masturbate at night, I think of him, not of his image or his malty smell, just the darkness and the fear and the pain." And when Bell insists that he cannot break up with her, he willingly goes to the movies with her, where she asphyxiates him with a gag that has a strap, and he eroticizes how he wants "to move out of this. To squirm ... When the lights come on I'm resting; I can hardly feel my hair caught in the buckle."

Still, after bravely portraying ambiguities for most of the book, Elliott does finally succumb to romanticism. Partly, that's because he finds someone worth loving. The last four stories in "My Girlfriend" are about a tender, thoughtful woman Elliott eventually hooks up with who *also* cuts him with a knife, punches him in the head, and asphyxiates him for her pleasure. But this woman, whom he calls Eden, tells him she loves him, puts chocolate in his mouth after she tortures him, actually asks him what he needs "to make this work" when he's worried that her husband and her other boyfriend will prevent him from getting enough time with her.

For some people, this truly would be paradise. It apparently is for Elliott. But because he and Eden love each other, he seems to ignore the times she does trespass his boundaries and expressed wishes. Although ethical S/M hinges on the bottom's absolute consent, there are times when both Elliott and his lover seem indifferent to this dictum. On one occasion Elliott can't breathe because she is closing the air hole in a mask she made him wear, and he shakes his head "no no no no" -- he wants it to stop. She asks "Are you saying no to me?" But Elliott can't go that far. "So I lie still and take what she wants to give me, which is what I always do when I think she's going too far -- stretch myself out, take more..." Unlike in his other stories, the authorial voice in these pretends that this is fine.

In other passages, he has no problem delving deeply into similar minefields. For example, although he ostensibly loves pain, another story has Elliott realizing, ecstatically, that a certain time when Eden is fucking him he feels the pleasure with no pain at all, just physical delight and joy. "I couldn't believe it didn't hurt." For many, many readers who are quite seldom acknowledged in American fiction, the prospect of enjoying sex with no pain at all, not even psychic pain, is so unusual and so hard-won that it is an event, like this, when it comes. This prospect actually makes Elliott say, "Here's what makes me think I'm not kinky anymore."

On a certain level, Elliott seems to grasp the contradiction between Eden's love and the 25 stripes that she carves into his back. In an epilogue titled "My Mainstream Girlfriend" he talks about how rarely she cuts him, how they go the movies, he loves to eat her out, they're not really all that leathery after all! If the

narrator didn't feel any anxiety about the contradiction, he wouldn't include all the benign details. Yet Elliott is heroic as a writer because for the most part, he *does* face unsettling ambiguities -- millions of them -- in this book. What do you do when a part of you wants or even needs something that will make you feel like shit? What do you do when your own experience of abuse is intimately, maybe indissolubly connected to the parts of you that love? When Eden beats his head, Elliott writes, "The animal I sound like doesn't exist yet. Like a strange beast dying in the forest." He wants to find that beast, to hear it fully, figure out what it's trying to say. The beginning of comprehending that strange animal is to give it voice as eloquently as Elliott has.

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Donna Minkowitz is the author of the memoir "Growing Up Golem: How I Survived My Mother, Brooklyn, and Some Really Bad Dates."

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